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Multi-Tiered, Multi-Disciplinary Work Teams--The CSU CAFO Work Group Tackles Controversial Public Issues

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Multi-Tiered, Multi-Disciplinary Work Teams--The CSU CAFO Work Group Tackles Controversial Public Issues

Abstract

The Colorado State University Cooperative Extension administration formed a multi-disciplinary and multi-level working group to address the debate over large confined animal feeding operations. The work group structure included campus-based extension personnel, regional specialists, and county agents from each of Colorado's Extension regions. The group undertook to inform the CE system, interest groups, elected officials, and the lay public about CAFO policy issues. Evaluation suggests support for the structure, content, and activities of the group. All respondents thought that the work group was a useful model for public policy and public issues education, although areas for improvement were also identified.

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Introduction

Livestock operations have a long tradition in rural Colorado's agricultural economy. Beef and dairy cattle, sheep, and the crops to feed them are an essential part of the Colorado landscape. Recent poor corn, wheat, and beef prices have created a tense atmosphere in many rural Colorado towns. The number of agricultural operations is in decline statewide. However, overall livestock inventories are stable or increasing. Colorado livestock operations (and agricultural operations in general) are getting larger, more specialized, and more integrated, and small, diversified farms are becoming increasingly scarce.

Growth in the Colorado livestock industry can be attributed to a close to 100%-increase in hog numbers since 1993 to about 800,000 (United States Department of Agriculture, 1999). This growth is almost exclusively spread among 17 large integrated and, largely, corporately owned farrowing and nursery operations. Rural Colorado communities are struggling to understand and evaluate the social, natural resource, environmental, and economic challenges and opportunities that hog operations create as a potential engine of community economic development.

Colorado is also among the fastest growing states in the country (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Agricultural land is being converted to residential development at a rapid rate (Obermann, Carlson, & Batchelder, 2000). Rural demographics are changing as retiring urbanites and telecommuters choose to homestead in traditionally agriculturally driven communities (McGranahan, 1999). Three-fourths of Coloradoans now live in urban or suburban communities in the North-South corridor within about 30 miles of the Rocky Mountains (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). New urbanites are attracted to Colorado for its abundant outdoor recreational opportunities and natural amenities among other things (McGranahan, 1999).

It can be expected that state legislative action will increasingly represent and respond to this progressively more urban majority, which may or may not coincide with traditional Colorado priorities and values. Increasingly, rural residents feel left out of state-level politics and recognize that the "I-25 Corridor" is where state-level policy is made (Carlson, personal communication, 1999).

Justification

In the spring of 1998, several rural counties contacted Colorado State University Cooperative Extension (CSUCE) requesting information and assistance in strategic planning and in evaluating economic development alternatives through livestock operations, particularly dairy and hogs. At the same time, Colorado Counties Incorporated (CCI), a nongovernmental organization comprised of 61 of the 63 Colorado county commissions, requested CSUCE's assistance in evaluating the policy environment, community economics, natural resources, and odor issues surrounding livestock operations, hog operations particularly.

By early summer, two state level ballot initiatives (Amendments 13 and 14) and their advertising campaigns aiming to regulate livestock operations, but particularly hog farms, were initiated, and the popular press began running "pro" and "con" corporate hog operation columns, articles and op-ed pieces. A detailed comparison of the Colorado livestock policy environment with the provisions of Amendments 13 and 14 is provided in Seidl and Grannis, 1998.

Dozens of requests were made of Extension agents and specialists for the "facts" from many different perspectives on the issue. Responding to these immediate concerns, in anticipation of greater public demands for information, and the opportunity to be "proactive" on an important public policy issue drove the CSU Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) Work Group to form. A "teachable moment" on a public issue of statewide importance was at hand.

The CSU CAFO Work Group

At the urging of a small number of state and regional specialists and county agents, the administration of CSUCE decided to form a multi-disciplinary and multi-level working group to address the present and upcoming debate over large confined animal feeding operations, particularly hogs. The work group structure included campus-based Extension personnel, regional specialists, and at least one county agent from each of Colorado's five Extension regions (names, titles and affiliations acknowledged below). Individuals were invited to join the work group based upon professional interest, responsibility, and expertise.

The group created a listserv in order to keep one another apprised of breaking issues in the state and around the nation, to share questions and responses to queries, and to attend to requests for presentations, interviews and written information. Limited and unspecified regular operating funds leveraged with a \$13,000 contract from CCI and a \$4,500 contract from a county economic development authority were allocated toward these activities.

Objectives

As a result of the CAFO Work Group's formation, a public policy education Web site was created, and a mission statement was drafted and posted there. "Cooperative Extension's role in public policy education is to: 1) raise the important questions that should be addressed; 2) provide the best possible information based on current science; and 3) facilitate discussions so that policy makers and citizens can make wise decisions. Cooperative Extension does not advocate for a particular strategy or point of view, but rather assists the public in understanding the implications of potential courses of action."

The CAFO Work Group took these as its guiding principles in providing current, objective, and salient information to both rural and urban voters regarding the multiple aspects of CAFOs in a variety of educational formats.

Programmatic Response

1. In August 1998, a 2-day training session was held for CAFO Work Group members and the leaders of the major interest groups in the state (e.g., Farmers Union, Colorado Counties Inc [CCI], Farm Bureau, Colorado Water Quality Control Commission [WQCC], NRCS). Some trainers were internal (e.g., Seidl [Policy and Community Economic Impacts], Waskom and Davis [Water Quality Issues and Manure Management Best Management Practices]). In addition, recognized experts from around the nation (Iowa State University, University of Missouri, and North Carolina State University) were invited to "train-the-trainers." Attendees were provided a notebook of materials entitled "CAFO Info" that briefly covered the broad issues to be addressed.
2. A brochure detailing the two ballot initiatives was generated from within the group. Of the 10,000 produced, 8,500 were distributed at public meetings, in press packets, and through individual requests. The brochure and other documents were posted to the public policy education home page. This home page will remain as repository for Public Issues Education (PIE) & Public Policy Education (PPE) materials.
3. Fact sheets were created covering economic issues, policy issues, community development issues, and effluent management issues
<<http://dare.agsci.colostate.edu/extension/pubs.html>>, APR98-01 to 05 and APR99-01 to 04).
4. An edition of the CSUCE Agronomy Newsletter, *From the Ground Up*, was dedicated to the

ballot initiatives <<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/SoilCrop/extension/Newsletters/news.html/1998/1998/sept98gu.pdf>>.

5. Stories using Work Group information or interviews ran in the *Colorado Tribune* (Pueblo), the *High Plains Journal* (Kansas), the *Pagosa Springs Sun*, the *Julesburg Advocate*, the *Greeley Tribune*, the *Pueblo Chieftain*, the *Yuma Pioneer*, the *Ft. Collins Coloradoan*, and *Pork98* printed media. Television interviews were conducted for the Salida, Ft. Collins, and Grand Junction television stations.
6. In addition to a number of classroom presentations and fielding hundreds of phone calls and drop-ins, more than 1,000 participants attended public presentations by Work Group members on Colorado CAFOs and the Ballot Initiatives.
7. Work Group members collaborated with CCI to produce a 32-page document and executive summary for county commissioners covering odor technology, model local ordinances, community costs and benefits, and national policy trends (Seidl & Davis, 1999).
8. Several members (Davis, McPhail-Gray, Seidl, Walker, and Waskom) were involved with the rule-making process after Amendment 14 was passed. (Amendment 13 was defeated). Their activities included serving as an expert witness panel on behalf of the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission (WQCC). In the hearings, CSU personnel were recognized by both sides as fair and objective providers of the scientific information needed to craft necessary and sufficient legislation.
9. Several members (Davis, Waskom, Seidl, and Tranel) continue involvement in regional and national CAFO policy efforts. This allows the CSUCE CAFO Work Group to keep abreast of regional and national initiatives and for Work Group members to relate policy issues in Colorado to regional and national experts.

Evaluation

An evaluation was conducted of the CSUCE CAFO Work Group in July 1999, approximately 1 year after its formation. The return rate for the e-mail administered evaluation was 60% (12/20). Respondents were evenly distributed between on and off campus personnel and were considered "core" Work Group members.

Respondents provided their opinions on aspects of the structure, activities, content, and impact of the Work Group. Group members were asked to rank their relative agreement with statements about these aspects of the Work Group on a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). A summary of the responses of campus and off-campus personnel is found in Table 1.

Overall responses were supportive of the structure, content, and activities of the group. No overall mean responses were neutral or negative. The impact of the Work Group was considered fair to good, meeting some expectations but requiring improvement in areas. All respondents who gave an opinion thought that the Work Group was a useful model for public policy and public issues education, although many indicated there were weak points to the Work Group as a model. Both positive and critical comments are highlighted below.

Table 1.
Responses to CSU CAFO Work Group Evaluation, by Location

Question	Off-Campus n=6	Campus n=6	Overall n=12
The Structure of the group was			
effective	5.33	4.33	4.83
efficient	5.50	4.17	4.83
fair	6.00	5.33	5.64
inclusive	5.17	5.50	5.33

The Activities of the group were			
appropriate	5.67	5.17	5.42
effective	5.83	3.83	4.83
efficient	5.67	4.33	5.00
inclusive	5.00	5.17	5.08
The Content of the materials was			
objective	6.17	5.33	5.75
comprehensive	6.17	5.00	5.58
the best science available	6.17	5.17	5.67
effectively communicated	5.67	3.83	4.75
The Impact of the group was (4=Outstanding, 3=Good, 2=Fair, 1=Poor)	2.83	2.17	2.50
The group is a good PIE model (1=yes, 0=no)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Note: Except for the last two rows, responses are to a 7-point Likert scale where 1= Strongly disagree, 4=Neither agree nor disagree, and 7=Strongly agree. PIE is Public Issues Education.			

Generally speaking, off-campus personnel were more positive about the CSU CAFO Work Group than were on-campus personnel. The range of mean responses to questions for off-campus respondents was 5.00-6.17, whereas on-campus personnel mean responses were 3.83-5.50. On- and off-campus responses differed statistically on four questions, with off campus providing higher ratings in each case:

- Effectiveness of work group activities ($p < 0.01$);
- Effectiveness of the communication of the content of work group materials ($p < 0.01$);
- Efficiency of work group activities ($p < 0.05$); and
- Impact of the Work Group ($p < 0.05$).

On- and off-campus personnel also differed with regard to their ranking of questions. Table 2 illustrates the range and rank of mean responses from on- and off-campus personnel. Potentially most notable is that off-campus personnel ranked the inclusiveness of the structure and activities of the Work Group lowest, whereas the inclusive structure gained the highest ranking of campus-based personnel.

Structural aspects (efficiency, effectiveness, and inclusiveness) of the Work Group garnered three of the four lowest rankings among off-campus personnel, while content features gained their three highest rankings. Effectiveness and efficiency in communication, structure, and activities were of greatest concern to campus-based personnel. In spite of the relatively low ranking of the efficiency of the work group, all evaluators providing a response indicated that the CSUCE CAFO Work Group provided a useful model for public issues and public policy education.

Table 2.
Rank of Responses to CSU CAFO Work Group Evaluation, by Location

Off Campus	Campus	Overall

Objective Content	6.17	Inclusive Structure	5.50	Objective Content	5.75
Comprehensive Content	6.17	Fair Structure	5.33	Content Best Science	5.67
Content Best Science	6.17	Objective Content	5.33	Fair Structure	5.64
Fair Structure	6.00	Appropriate Activities	5.17	Comprehensive Content	5.58
Effective Activities	5.83	Inclusive Activities	5.17	Appropriate Activities	5.42
Appropriate Activities	5.67	Content Best Science	5.17	Inclusive Structure	5.33
Efficient Activities	5.67	Comprehensive Content	5.00	Inclusive Activities	5.08
Content Effectively Communicated	5.67	Effective Structure	4.33	Efficient Activities	5.00
Efficient Structure	5.50	Efficient Activities	4.33	Effective Structure	4.83
Effective Structure	5.33	Efficient Structure	4.17	Efficient Structure	4.83
Inclusive Structure	5.17	Effective Activities	3.83	Effective Activities	4.83
Inclusive Activities	5.00	Content Effectively Communicated	3.83	Content Effectively Communicated	4.75
Note: Responses are to a 7-point Likert scale where 1= Strongly disagree, 4=Neither agree nor disagree, and 7=Strongly agree.					

Concluding and Retrospective Remarks

The Colorado State University CAFO Working Group was formed as an interdisciplinary group to address an important and timely issue of public policy. While activities can be listed easily, it is less simple to evaluate the Working Group's effectiveness due to its role in education rather than advocacy.

The CAFO Working Group may not have effectively overridden the expensive onslaught of emotion-driven advertising and lobbying efforts surrounding the Initiatives with its low-budget, objective information. Yet the Working Group generally thought that it was the Group's responsibility to address these important public issues to its best abilities despite limitations in having the message heard. Moreover, the Group may have benefited from the inclusion of producers, environmental activists, and expertise from other public agencies (e.g., NRCS, FSA) in the group.

Overall, based upon experiences with the CSUCE CAFO Working Group, issues teams designed in this manner can provide an effective means of providing timely, appropriate, and accurate cross-disciplinary information to Extension audiences on complex issues of public concern and interest.

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